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HUNTINGTON WEST VIRGINIA 25701

Tapes 1a + 1b

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(Signature - Interviewee)

(Address)

DATE

Feb 1, 1984

(Signature - Witness)

Catherine Morris Wright



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Ross, Joan

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DATE: X Joan 21, 1992

X Joan E. Ross
(Signature - Interviewee)

X 540 5th Ave
(Address)

X Huntington WV 25701

DATE: X 1/21/92

X Maie Willis
(Signature - Witness)

WVCO.1

WEST VIRGINIA COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Joan Ross

CONDUCTED BY: Catherine Morris-Wright

DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 2, 1984

Catherine: This is Catherine Morris-Wright, and I'm going to interview Mrs. Joan Ross of Southwestern Community Council, February 2, 1984. Okay, uh, I need your name and address, please.

Joan: Okay, I'm Joan Ross and I'm from Huntington, West Virginia.

Catherine: Okay, your date and place of birth.

Joan: Huntington, 3-1-33.

Catherine: Okay. And the job you hold presently.

Joan: I'm the executive director of Southwestern Community Action, which is the community action agency and also the area agency on aging.

Catherine: Okay. And how did you become involved in Southwestern Community Council?

Joan: I was asked by the council to do a random sampling survey of Cabell, Lincoln and Mason on the conditions of the elderly. And the purpose of the survey was to show that social security was not the be-all and end-all that people thought it was. And to document historically, or document for Congress rather, that uh, the social security was not meeting the needs of the people. And to do that, we conducted a 22-page random sampling survey and trained older to be the surveyors, to also illustrate that older people still (inaudible due to traffic noise in background)...

Catherine: Okay. So were you working for the council at that point, or did they ask you from outside to come in and do this?

Joan: They ask me to come in and do it. (mmm-hmm) I had been involved in helping to set up the board when the economic opportunity act was first uh, passed, I was helping to set up the Cabell County Board. I had a baby and got involved with the baby and didn't get back to them 'til they called and asked me to get involved.

Catherine: Do you have a background in social work?

Joan: No. (so how did you get involved...?) I just...I just did volunteer work uh, when I was in college teaching in Chicago, but I don't have a formal background. I got involved with it but they knew about me, because I had been involved in studying at the Senior Center at West 8th Street here in Huntington. And as a volunteer for the junior league. I had been actively involved in starting senior citizens programs.

Catherine: Have you always worked with the elderly?

Joan: No, no, when I was doing volunteer work in Chicago, I taught piano to low-income children.

Catherine: Oh, that's fascinating. So you just sort of got involved with the elderly after you came to Huntington, after you came back to Huntington.

Joan: Right, right.

Catherine: What is the purpose of the council?

Joan: Simplistically, to help poor people stop being poor. And there are two ways we do that. One is dealing with the causes and the other...or the symptoms, which are the mediate release, while we deal with the more basic issues, the cause. And the best example I can give of that is the high school dropout program, called the Neighborhood Youth Corp, that was part of the economic opportunity act, battery of programs that were passed toto do this. And the Neighborhood Youth Corp took low-income high school dropouts and of course, the symptom of something being very wrong was large numbers of kids were dropping out of high school. And at one point in time we had about a hundred and seventeen, or maybe a hundred and forty children from here in Cabell County, and these kids were all obviously going to have income problems because they dropped out of high...not all but the majority of them would have problems....because they had dropped out of high school. So the immediate symptomatic relief was to get them either their high school education, their GED or some kind of skills training. Depending upon their potential. And a plan was drafted for each child that dropped out, to maximize what their potential would be. (an individual plan?) A very individual plan, that's right. And uh, in the meantime, we did physicals as a routine, just when they came in to the program, because most kids didn't eat well, they had terrible nutrition habits and that ...that has been a major problem all along with young people, is they've succumbed to the advertising industry, I don't wanna get off on that, (sure), but we ended up testifying in the state legislature and became influential in getting the junk foods removed from school. Because we saw such dramatic evidence of it in our programs, and children were taking their lunch money and spending it for junk foods and that kind of thing. But anyway, to get back to the kids, we did these physicals, we volunteer help uh, and the doctors were very nice about volunteering and we turned up a significant number of these kids had major hearing problems and the tradition in the schools, whether they admit it or not, has been to be the bright child, who is eager to learn, and respond, on the front and those uncooperative, stubborn children who don't care, go to the back row. Well, if the majority of them couldn't hear and they were shuffled to the back row, then you know they were gonna get left out and the problem compounded itself. We made that information available to three county boards of education that we were working with at that time. We do not yet operate in Mason county, and one of those boards, Wayne County, put on a mobile three testing unit and they went around and really tested for this problem. Now, subsequently, you have seen legislation for handicapped children, and hearing has become one of those things that is tested. Boards of Education will tell you that hearing was always tested in the public schools

but in reality not all children were tested and many times the problems that they had were (inaudible).

Catherine: That's fascinating. So, when the council was initially set up, what county's did it involve?

Joan: Uh, it was a merger of three independent county community action programs. When the economic opportunity act was passed in 1964, the legislation gave every county in the United States who could document poverty, an opportunity to get federal money to deal with that problem. And the concept has always been a partnership of the federal, the state, and the local level, working together both public and private and involving low-income people themselves in the decision making, which helps attack the poverty which plagues them.

Catherine: Does this...do you think the Southwest Community Council prevents a lot of overlapping from the various other agencies in Huntington?

Joan: (Or has that even been a problem?) There has been federal legislation that was passed. It's called the Clearing House. Now, this is all just changed in the past year. But there used to be what was required what was known as the Clearing House Review. And in the federal legislation that was passed about the same time as the economic opportunity act was passed, regional planning and development councils were established. They came a little bit after the economic opportunity act. And they served as the clearing house at the regional level for all federal funds and then they were sent to the state and the state was supposed to look at them for overlapping the duplication at the state level. Uh, in experience, I have found that the coordination and cooperation exists for agency heads or agency staff, I won't say agency heads, but agency staff wants it to. It may be mandated by the legislation, but in reality, it occurs because people at the local level want it to. I know say these city administrators, so I will call them when I'm getting ready to do something and see how we can coordinate it. Even then uh, federal and state agencies, particularly federal agencies, do not want to lose the identity of their programs, so they...they become barriers for local coordination. I can give some real dramatic examples of that. The uh, department of labor likes to have an extremely clear audit trail, so I can have two contracts from the department of labor, for manpower type training programs. Either directly like we use to have, or now through the state under the grant system. And the state obeys the department of labor because it funds them. We had a secretary in one of those programs, who had some free time occasionally at the end of the day, so she would type for the other program. The department of labor would not allow that. And they....they made...they wanted us, I won't say they made us, because we contested it, but they wanted us to refund the money for the time that she spent on the other program, although they funded both programs. And uh, there has been a lot of turf problems, particularly again at the federal level. We had the same thing happen at HHS, out of the same office, at HHS in

Philadelphia, which was then HEW, we had a two programs; we operated the runaway youth program and the headstart program. They had the same staff administering the program at the federal level. Again, we had some typing, some general supervision provided by, staff funded by one program over the other program, which didn't have the allocations for those kinds of services. And again, there was a tremendous frustration at the regional level because we did that. And we had to promise that at least our time sheets did not show that we did that.

Catherine: How does the local...local organizations mesh with the state? Does that work out alright?

Joan: Uh, I think just in the last 6 months, the state is trying or I won't even say 6 months, I'd say last 2 months, the state is beginning to recognize the problems that is caused by the multiplicity of guidelines, every agency at the state and regional and national level hears their own drummer. And there is a process called well, it's attachment P, which says you'll have a single agency audit, and an OMP to their credit, has been trying to streamline the process. It's not any one administration; it's transcended a lot of administrations at the federal level. And the ...at the local level, nobody wants to give up their level, not the local level, but the federal level and the state level. And so everybody who reports the same budget information on different forms, everybody does everything differently, and it makes for a tremendous amount of work. Now attachment P says when you get federal funds, you will have a single agency wide audit, and July 1, Southwestern will be allowed to have it's first single-wide agency audit. And we're now dealing with the problems of those agencies that refuse to adhere to Attachment P, even though the law says they will. They are finding ways of making it difficult.

Catherine: Has the Southwest grown a great deal since the great society, shall we say? (laughs)

Joan: Well, it's difficult to say. In some ways, it has and in some ways it hasn't. When the economic opportunity act was passed, and you documented the need to get your money, and you went to Washington with your plans, things were funded in lumps, and you had a great deal of flexibility. Southwestern started the first shelter workshop that was the genesis of the Green Acres program. (oh) And we've started a lot of things. Southwestern funded or started and initiated the Appalachian Craftsman program. And Southwestern's been the initiator of a lot of other programs. Those programs then spin off, which decreases our funding bases. Or the dollar (inaudible).... So, in that sense, we use to be the largest operator of Manpower programs in the region. Okay, but federal legislation changed, CETA came in and all that changed. Now as an agency, we feel that was not a good change. It politicized the money that beforehand had been non-political. And we feel that CETA was a bad piece of legislation, for that reason. Not because we lost a million dollars. We got some of it

back, through sub-contracts. But because we feel it strongly politicized.

Catherine: Had that been a big problem?

Joan: Oh, yes, yes, because uh, the selection, well, the selection and determination of who gets the benefit of the training changed because the guidelines changed and it allowed for political patronage payoffs through employment in those programs. And it had not been that way. And uh, although it destroyed any local programs that were working, regardless of their validity, I'll go back to the neighborhood youth corp. It was discontinued across the state in spite of the fact it was shown to be one of the best programs, both statewide and national that dealt with the high school dropout. We use to have doctors call us and say, will you take my child into this program, because we had such a good success rate. If I pay you and we couldn't do that, and we had a very...I can't tell you the percentage off this, but we had a really high percentage of success with those kids.

Catherine: When was that discontinued?

Joan: With the advent of CETA, the Comprehensive Employment Training Act. And uh, it really was.

Catherine: Is it just federal politics you feel, or is it state politics?

Joan: Well, you can't divorce federal and state politics. They're both integrated. I think it's all part of what's known as federalism. And you're seeing a return to state's rights. And that does two things: that takes the heat off Congress because we have been training people to watch what their congressman did and said, and whether or not they in fact were truly representing the interests of the areas that they came from. And we had been encouraging direct participation in the congressional legislative process. And that did generate a lot of heat; not so much in this state because there's more our congressmen generally are more aware of the need of the individual constituents than most congressmen apparently are. But particularly in some areas, uh, Mississippi, Alabama, you are seeing the kind of things, you are seeing people developing clout, that congressmen didn't want to have clout, so they simply shifted that uh, interest to the state level by saying, okay, we're gonna give you the money, you decide what the needs are and that was a way of taking the heat off, and taking the visibility off them. It also took the state government's (inaudible) because it gave them money and originally a lot of people, including state officials thought that this was new money coming down. And it was a gradual awareness that occurred when they realized it's not only old money, but it's (inaudible) money. And uh, so therefore, you're gonna have a lot of unhappy people.

Catherine: Uh, when I say has it grown, has it...does it take in more counties now?

Joan: Yes, we now take in Mason County, it originally encompassed Cabell, Lincoln and Wayne. And we merged the three individual community action programs in 1967. And in 1970 we added Mason and two years ago we added uh, Mingo and Logan under the area agency.

Catherine: Has that been a problem, as far as county identification?

Joan: Fantastic! No, really, no, I'm saying it's really interesting. It's...it's almost like at times you have six feudal kingdoms and none of whom talk to the other. And it's uh, it is amazing to me how people can live so close and yet be so different because each of the county's has it's own characteristics and it's own qualities (mmm-hmm). None are any better or any worse; they're just totally different.

Catherine: Were they hesitant...I mean, to mix?

Joan: Oh, absolutely. It was a true shock in a marriage. And uh, my remembrances of Mason County are when the board chairman up there called them and he said, young lady, we don't want to have anything to do with you and we're gonna fight it any way we can. (laughs) And then when uh, Mingo and Logan were first, were supposed to come into this region, as a part of the regional council, the commissioners from Mason, who by that time had joined us, called me and asked me if I would go to those hearings with him. Well, we were sitting together and when Mingo and Logan started saying derogatory things about Cabell, Lincoln, Mason and Wayne, suddenly Mason was delighted to be with us. And of course, we were glad to have 'em. And uh, but there was...there's Mason...Mingo and Logan still bulk at being a part of this federal reg...I mean, state region. And in comprehensive help uh, I'm sorry, on the mental health system, where there were supposed to be a mental health center, in this region only you have two mental health centers; one for Mingo and Logan and one for Cabell, Lincoln, Mason and Wayne. And the reasons are Mason County is predominantly republican, has heavy industry and very little mining. Mingo and Logan are democratic; there may be republicans down there, I think ...

Catherine: reply inaudible.

Joan: ...right. Well, I know there are in Logan, because the mayor of Logan's been a republican at times. But uh, there aren't many. And they are heavily coal mine. And the interests are so different. So it's not just the obvious politics or just the squabbling or feuding or fussing or fighting. It's a real difference in economic base. And a difference in a cultural base. And a difference in relating. Mason County for example, relates more to the Jackson County and a lot of people in Mason work in the industries that are located along the Ohio, as you go towards Ripley. Wherein Lincoln and Logan I mean, Mingo and Logan, the economy of the communities is based on the coal industry almost exclusively. So it's a totally different environment. The typography is different. There's a section of Mason County that

has I don't know if you've ever been up on Route 35, you cannot believe the homes, there's three or four farms. There's the _____ mansion, and one or two others that are absolutely gorgeous. Theythey're almost Mt. Vernon type stature, gorgeous, gorgeous homes. And you can't believe you're in West Virginia. I haven't seen anything that elegant anywhere else in the state, including the governor's mansion. They're gorgeous homes! And you've got those in Mason County, plus you have flat land that is uh, uh, used for agriculture, production agriculture (mmm-hmm), and you don't have if any, very, very limited production agriculture in the other four counties. Maybe a little bit in Cabell County. But very little.

Catherine: You mentioned when I was talking to you yesterday on the phone, that the fact that the big city at all be a problem.

Joan: Well, Huntington...of course, Cabell County's totally different. It is neither fish nor fowl (inaudible) other counties. We are not considered democratic or republican; we're registered democrat and vote republican. Uh, we just don't mesh with West Virginia at all. Part of that I think is due to the influence of C & O railroad and the transposed Virginian's. (mmm-hmm) Uh, in our...there are all kinds of ways you can see this. You see that with the heavy Virginian in the sale of furniture, you see people in Huntington use a lot of furniture that has the Queen Anne and the Virginian style, the Williamsburg look and everything. And you see more of that in Huntington than in other cities in West Virginia, because West Virginia related to Richmond when they brought all the people in. And as a result, we never related to Charleston. And the counties around us were not enchanted with Huntington. Their awareness of Huntington a hundred years ago, it was a place where the mine owners and operators lived. And it was the big city. And it was the center of sin, you know, we got a lot of publicity when the blue movie opened and things like that. And when we started in 1967 holding multi-county meetings and holding a lot of those meetings here in Huntington, the people from Crum and Harts were not really enchanted with coming to Huntington. They saw it as coming to Sodom or Gomorrah. And remember a lot of the people were fundamentalists. (sure, still are) Yes, we accompanied these people as staff. And really some of them truly looked over their shoulders, I mean, waiting for sin to strike them if they walked down the streets. And then we went out into the counties, we ...we also accompanied the blacks there. Uh, they were equally pessimist about going out because they had heard stories about black people who had just disappeared when they went into the counties.

Catherine: What is the black population out in the counties? I mean, is it very large?

Joan: Lincoln County in the census is zero, but there's one black family. Uh, Wayne has a small percentage. Cabell County only has 4 percent. Most of that's in Huntington. And what you see in the Census in Wayne County is in the Huntington boundaries, in most

cases. And uh, when you get down into to Crum and Dunlow and Prichard and Fort Gay and even Wayne, there are not blacks. And so you, you know, they were just very hesitant about going out because there was lots of stories (sure) about what had happened to the blacks. So we would accompany the black staff. And I'm very proud of the black staff of Southwestern, because they did affect integration in most of these counties. And there was one instance where I remember we had a board meeting out in the Lincoln County courthouse and you know, I've given you some names of some people I think you ought to talk with...I've thought of some more, too. Because that was really, that was really dramatic in some places where we took the blacks. And I think what struck me was the commitment of both the blacks and the whites. To make integration work in those counties. I mean, every...there was a really good feeling about commitment, working as a team.

Catherine: Would this have been in the mid '60's? I mean... (yes)...okay.

Joan: And the early '70's, a lot of this was in '71, '72. In the, around '67, '68, '69 as staff, Southwestern would eat in the restaurants, blacks and whites, and there again was a commitment on the part of the Southwestern staff to demonstrate their commitment to equal rights by practicing it visually in downtown Huntington. And that had a lot of repercussions. It uh, (I'm sure), for the staff who did it who lived here, there was strong feeling from their social peer groups. And they you know, a lot of people had a lot of problem with it. But again there was a (inaudible) about making the world a really better place and practicing your christian commitment that existed among staff, it was just outstanding.

Catherine: How big of a staff were you dealing with when you first came to work here?

Joan: I really don't remember.

Catherine: How big of a staff do you have now?

Joan: We have about 350 on staff. (it's incredible...throughout the five counties?) Well, that would be the four counties and about 45 of those are in Mingo and Logan. We do not operate the community action programs in Mingo and Logan. They are separately funded programs and they're independent of us. Again reflecting that desire not to be part of us. (yeah) Uh, I wanted to say one other thing about the integration. When we did the random sampling survey for FIND, which was the name of the survey, there was a black woman named Rose Webb, who was the first person to go out in rural Cabell County. And in her case, she didn't say anything to us about the names, the list she had been given to survey (mmm-hmm) and we didn't realize it was the rural area back of Milton, she was...she had the kind of commitment to the community in what we were doing that she didn't tell us how frightened she was, and she said the first day that she went out in to Milton, she just got down on her knees before she left the

house and she said. Lord, I'm trying to do your work, you go with me. And she said she was scared to death. when she knocked on that first door, because she had heard stories about what happened. And she said of course, the people were very nice, they understood what she wanted, we had done a lot of pre-publicity. And they invited her in and gave her a cup of coffee or tea or something and it just went beautifully. She was just a fantastic lady.

Catherine: Has the integration continued as well as it started off?

Joan: Uh, integration was forced, so there has been a lot of backlash uh, I think the thing I remember has nothing to do with the agency, but an example of what happened was uh, when integration was occurring at Huntington High, well, it does have to do with the agency, because we sent agency staff over to work with Huntington High School, when Huntington High School was integrated and we sent our counselors over to try to help the counseling staff over there because they were not prepared for what occurred. But we found out that there were carloads of people from Ohio who would come over, write obscenities, spray canned paint on the sidewalk and on the steps of the school, against blacks and whites, but it would always appear as blacks had said it (sure) to whites and so forth. I know of specific instances where they broke out the windows of the cars and everything, and then they would leave, before the kids got out of school. Of course, when the kids got out of school, they would be all inflamed. And it took everybody a while to wise up to the fact that there was (to what was going on), that there was an outsider. But by then you see

TAPE 2

Joan: ...nearly 24 hours a day involved and our families were involved and we were truly committed. And now...

Catherine: but does the enthusiasm fade after awhile?

Joan: ...well, what's happened is, the enthusiasm's been legislated out. (mmm-hmm) Uh, because what happens is you now have created a situation where you had the agency is dependent upon the political support of the communities, as well as it's goal and mission in everything. And of course, our goal, our purpose is to help the commissioners and the people like that, the political segment, deal more effectively with the low income. But we certainly can't get any...we certainly can't use confrontation techniques (sure), because they're the decision-makers of each of us. And staffing wise it has split staff because staff have to go with local county, I mean, go to county loyalties, rather than (inaudible)...because now you have decisions being made by people from their counties. And you had the counties communicating directly with staff about their goals and objectives and so that's politicized the decision-making process within the staff (mmm-hmm), planning process.

Catherine: Have you seen the numbers I guess, obviously the population has grown, but has the numbers grown as far as the people, the low-income group that you treat?

Joan: It has because the standard of living has raised. And of course in West Virginia the unemployment is tremendous. And so you had, yes, you had more eligible participants. I...they meet the income criteria, there's a specific guideline (mmm), because of the numbers that have been laid off or who are unemployed. And because of the, the uh, what's happened is the so-called poverty floor has risen, you know, what use to be minimum standard for a family of four, I mean for was a good life, is now the minimum standard for a family of four.

Catherine: Well, that's partly because of inflation. (that's right)

Joan: And inflation, I think what makes me personally the maddest, is that there was a point when I think when we realized what Nixon was doing, which was more, far more insidious than just attacking the poor, which he did much more surreptitiously, even than, the Reagan Administration is more open, and honest about it. And they just said there aren't any poor and they're not going to take care of them. But, the uh, the Nixon Administration did it through administrative controls and changing laws. And what, there was a point there, when we realized what was happening, when we realized what was going to result, was that the poor are being pushed back down into poverty by the federal legislation and they are, it's actually creating two classes in this country: the rich

and the poor, the haves and the **have-nots**. And the ...there was just a point it was like a turning point, when you realize that just about the time people got their heads above water they were going to be pushed back down again. And I think that was probably the greatest personal frustration I had, because I had realized too, how helpless I was against that. Because the poor will never have the megabucks to lobby and that gets me back in that patronage system. He who pays for the election of someone controls that person once they're elected. And the poor are never going to be able to do that. Even if they had the numbers to vote.

Catherine: Do you have some sort of an...any sort of lobby, I mean, anybody you go through?

Joan: Theoretically we're prohibited from lobbying. See, and that again, we as staff are prohibited from lobbying. We, there's a new ONS regulation that prohibits us from using our office supplies, our times, the building, the xeroxing, to even disseminating information about specific legislation and it's effect. And theoretically, there's some who choose to interpret that regulation as saying that I can't even furnish our congress people with demographic information that shows the effect that the legislation....so the whole idea is to keep the congressmen unaware of what's happening. Now, the argument they use is those people make congress known themselves. Okay, a poor person in Upper Mud, or _____, or Little Harts Creek, does not know how to interpret legislation and it's effect on them and how is you know, what to write the congressmen to change it, much less how to even find that information (mmm-hmm), because it doesn't flow normally, back to the local community. You don't get it unless you ask for it and you've got to know what to ask for.

Catherine: And who to ask.

Joan: That's right. So, those people don't know. And the other thing is, there is a real fear, and it's still as prevalent today as it ever was, even though I think we've worked very hard to erode it; it's still there. That low-income people have that their benefits will be stopped if they raise their voice in protest, against what isthat's right. (CW reply inaudible) And it's just, it's a terrible situation. And we watch Annie the other night, and of course, I was, when I was a child, Annie was a cartoon in the newspaper and I never gave it any thought, it never occurred to be that the name Warbucks was because (inaudible), yeah and where he got the name. And of course, that's a great political movie. (sure) And you know, what I see us doing is moving back to that same situation exactly. We had a little brief day of sunlight, and now as a nation we seem to be moving back into 'he who has the dollars, get's, he who doesn't, doesn't.' Regardless of all of the so-called articulated values (mmmh) of this system. Money is really the determining decision-making. And it is not necessarily American money, in that sense. Because the multi-national corporations have the megabucks.

Catherine: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Ross. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Joan: Oh, I think just that philosophically I'm concerned that as a country we say we're christian but we have never yet dealt with competitive society and the concept, the **competition you have of winners and losers.** Now, we work with the so-called 'winners' rather than 'losers.' We work with the people who are not the winners. And as a country, the majority of people are not winners, because obviously winners just means they can only be a few. And the majority are not winners. And we say that we're a country who, who has **equality** and who treats everybody equally, but at the same time, we aren't willing to deal with our obligation to the non-winners. And there's, you know, we have a philosophical dicotomy.

Catherine: And the numbers are growing all the time.

Joan: That's right.

END OF INTERVIEW